

Bird Shots

by Mark Yokoyama



Introduction

Shooting birds—with a camera!—is a wonderful hobby. It is often challenging, but the thrill of getting a great shot is definitely addictive. In this book, we will cover some practical techniques for getting better bird photos with whatever equipment you use.

Whether you are a birder looking to improve your photography, or a photographer looking to improve your results with birds—or new to both—we hope this volume helps you get more enjoyment from bird photography.

Whenever possible, we have avoided getting too deep into technical details. There are plenty of resources about all aspects of both birds and photography if you are interested. Truth be told, the best—and most enjoyable—way to get better is to practice!





The Basics

Getting Close

Getting close is really the defining challenge of bird photography. It's why the pros have giant lenses that cost as much as a car, and it's why the rest of us have photos that probably aren't making it into *National Geographic* any time soon. Birds tend to keep their distance from us, and given our history of hunting them for food and feathers, one can hardly blame them.

Photographically speaking, there are two ways to get closer to birds. You can be physically closer or you can use a long lens or camera zoom to get optically closer to them. The best shots are usually a combination of the two. Long distance zooming introduces an array of challenges, so getting yourself closer is always the best way to start.

For great bird shots, you must learn to sneak up on birds. You can use vegetation, rocks or buildings to avoid being seen as you approach them. Some birdwatching locations feature huts or platforms with viewing windows. A disembodied head is apparently less threatening than an entire human. Birds can also be more approachable when you are in a car, a technique that shouldn't be used in areas which are not designed for vehicles.

Experience will also help you learn how closely you can approach different birds. This can depend on the species. Birds that depend more heavily on camouflage are more likely to remain still when approached. For these birds, if you avoid looking directly at them while approaching it often helps you get closer.



Start with Big Birds: It's an obvious tip, but it works. If you are having trouble getting close enough to little birds, try taking photos of big birds, like pelicans, frigatebirds and egrets.



Groups and Pairs: Sometimes you just can't get close enough to make a compelling photo of a single bird, but you can get something good by featuring multiple birds in the same photo.



Curiosity: Even though getting close to birds usually requires being as inconspicuous and nonthreatening as possible, sometimes curiosity can work in your favor.



Pishing: For songbirds, there is a technique called pishing, which is mimicking bird calls to attract birds. It can be a great way to get close-up shots of birds that are otherwise hard to see.

Skittishness may also depend on what the bird is doing. An egret that has found a really great fishing spot may be more likely to tolerate your presence. Learning to identify these special opportunities can be very valuable.

When it comes to approaching birds, there's no substitute for practice. Identify a good location near you, whether it is a nearby pond or the bird feeder in your backyard. Practice your stealthiest approach. Identify the path that allows you to remain hidden as long as possible. Take photos of your subject every couple meters as you approach to get a better idea how close you can get before they fly off. By practicing in one familiar location, you can quickly master techniques that will be useful wherever you go.

Best practices and codes of conduct for nature photography have been compiled by many organizations. In general, these are common sense practices: don't damage the environment or leave trash behind, be respectful of others, follow applicable rules and laws. Often, an understanding of the local environment and the birds you are photographing is necessary to ensure that you aren't damaging habitat or distressing your subjects.

Bird photography is a wonderful way to capture and share nature without disturbing it. It never hurts to refresh your knowledge of best practices, and we should all strive to be positive examples of good conduct and stewardship of our precious natural environment and the wide variety of life we share it with.

Zoom Zoom!

You've used your best ninja skills to get as close to a bird as you can. Can your camera zoom you in the rest of the way to get a great shot? Moving yourself closer to your subject is a key skill, but in most cases the camera is used to bridge the remaining gap.

This chapter will be relevant to anyone using a camera with some kind of zoom. Most point and shoot cameras do, and most folks with fancier cameras have lenses that zoom.

Most phone cameras and wide-angle action cameras like GoPro don't zoom, and they generally aren't going to be very useful for taking bird photos—sorry! For cameras that can zoom, whether big or small, the basic considerations are the same.

Zooming changes the focal length of the lens: as it gets longer, objects look closer. This is fantastic if you are trying to get great bird photos, but nothing comes for free. There are a few downsides to zooming that you should understand and can learn to minimize.

Most lenses get less sharp at the end of their zoom range. This is because lenses aren't perfect, and it is hard to make a lens that works well over a long focal range. Depending on the lens, it may not be very noticeable. If you can get so close that you don't need to zoom in all the way, this will help. Decreasing the aperture (the size of the hole where light is coming through) can also increase sharpness.



The types of bird photos you can take will depend in part on your camera and how much you are able to zoom in to a scene.



How closely you zoom in to a scene may completely change the feeling of your photographs.



One benefit of using a fast shutter speed to minimize the impact of your movement is that it also freezes the action of your subject.



Some images, like birds in flight, are almost impossible to capture without a fast shutter speed.

Zooming in makes it easy to get blurry photos. As you zoom in, any slight movement of your camera, even just pressing the shutter, can make the image blurry. One solution, which has been stabilizing things since before cameras were invented, is a tripod.

If you don't have a tripod, do your best to improvise. Lean against a tree or building, set your camera on a fencepost, or learn to turn yourself into a human tripod with a wide stance and your elbows tucked into your sides. A tripod works by providing stability, so anything you can do to stabilize your camera will help, even holding your breath when you take a shot.

You can also increase your shutter speed, shortening the time when light is reaching your camera sensor. The faster the shutter speed, the less time there is for movement to create blur. A nice bonus is that this will also freeze the motion of your subject if it is moving. A fast shutter speed works best in bright light. Since you are only letting light in for a very short moment, you need a lot of light at that moment.

Most photos are viewed on a phone or computer at low resolution, which mercifully hides many flaws. If you want to improve the technical quality of your photos you'll need to review them in high resolution. Technical quality isn't necessarily the most important attribute of a photo, but it is important for many uses, like print.

Shutter Speed

Of all the camera settings, shutter speed is probably the most important when you are zoomed in. When photographing birds, using shutter priority—setting the shutter speed you want or need and letting the camera adjust the aperture to get the right exposure—is often a good choice. The shutter speed is the amount of time the shutter is open and light is reaching your camera sensor (or film). The faster the speed, the more you can freeze motion, either yours or your subject's.

One rule of thumb is to have a shutter speed the inverse of the length of your lens in millimeters. By this measure, with a zoom lens at 400mm, use a shutter speed of 1/400th of a second. Some cameras and lenses have image stabilization, which reduces the impact of your movement so you can reduce your shutter speed if your subject isn't moving.

You can figure out what shutter speed works for you with a little bit of testing. When you look at an image, if everything is blurry, that's your motion. If only your subject is blurry, that's probably its motion. Find the shutter speed that lets you consistently take clear photos when zoomed in.

If it freezes your motion and the motion of your subject, why not just use a super fast shutter speed all the time? A fast shutter speed doesn't let in much light, so you need a bright day or you need to adjust your aperture or ISO to get a good exposure. How you set each parameter has its own trade-offs.



If everything in your photo is blurry, the cause is movement of the camera when taking the photo.



When only part of your photo is blurry, it is usually because your subject is moving. In this photo, only the fast-moving head and neck are blurry.



With a wide aperture, the heron's face is in focus, but the body and legs are less sharp and the branches quite out of focus.



With a narrower aperture, the entire heron is in focus, as well as more of the surroundings.

Aperture

Aperture, the size of the hole where light is entering the camera, may be the least important setting for this type of photography. Having a big opening lets lots of light in, which is great if you are only opening the shutter for a very short moment of time. However, there are some downsides to this.

First, most lenses are “soft” when you shoot them “wide open.” In normal speech, it means if you have the aperture open all the way, your images will not be as sharp. The best sharpness usually starts a couple “stops” smaller than the maximum.

Wider apertures also give less depth of field. Sometimes photographers limit the depth of field intentionally so only a small amount of the photo is in focus, but this isn't necessarily a good idea for bird photography. For birds, it is often nice if the eye and the bill are both in focus. A very small depth of field also means that any slight error or movement and your subject may be out of that narrow in-focus band.

That said, one can get great photos even at the widest aperture. The loss of sharpness won't be as much of a problem as blurriness from a photo with a shutter speed that is too slow. If I have enough light I will always try to shoot a few stops down, but this is the first thing I compromise when I don't have enough light.

ISO

Back in the day, before SD cards, cameras used a kind of memory stick that usually came in a little canister and they called it film. Different kinds of film had different speeds, indicating how much light it needed for exposure. “Faster” film required less light, but was grainier and “slow” film required more light but had better quality.

Today, digital cameras usually have a setting called ISO which controls the sensitivity of the sensor. Although the technology is totally different, the effect is the same. Lower ISO gives better image quality, using higher ISO lets you get photos in lower light (or with a faster shutter speed), but makes your images noisier.

ISO is one area in which cameras vary widely. Newer cameras are much better at taking decent images at higher ISO and cameras with small sensors, like point and shoot cameras, are often pretty bad (although also improving every year). For this reason, it’s impossible to give a guideline for ISO. In general, though, use low ISO if you can, and test your camera to see what ISO settings still produce usable images.

Also, if you are cropping an image, low-ISO noise will become more noticeable. If you make a lot of adjustments to your photos on the computer, many of these—like sharpening—may make low-ISO noise even more apparent. And, of course, if you are making images primarily for sharing in low resolution online, noise from low ISO may not be visible at all.



At a low ISO, there is no digital noise, even after cropping in to a small section of a photo



At high ISO, noise becomes very apparent, particularly when cropping in and using sharpening in post-production.



Techniques in the Field

Using Light

Light is what photos are made of. Learning how to use light is relatively simple and can make a huge difference in your photos.

When photographing birds, what you want light-wise is usually pretty simple: lots of light, illuminating the bird you're photographing. If you're using a fast shutter speed to freeze motion, it's very hard to get a great photo without it. For the most part, this means bright daylight, with the sun above or behind you. It also means open spaces are usually the best.

With this in mind, it is easy to plan your bird photography itinerary with good lighting in mind. Beaches and ponds are great because there is usually lots of light. Certain locations may be better in the morning or evening, depending on the direction you are facing. You can plan the time, location and even the direction you are walking to optimize for the best photos.

You may not always have the luxury of perfect light. If you're shooting forest birds, perhaps the best you can do is find a clearing and wait for birds to perch in a spot where there is a little extra light.

On a cloudy day, you may have to push the limits of your camera settings and make do with what you can get. Occasionally a flash can help, but often the bird is too far away for the flash to make a difference.



Morning and evening light can give rich, golden color to your photos. The angle of the light can be used to create striking contrasts as well.



Harsh midday sun can be challenging, especially for white or light-colored birds, but it can also produce some striking images. Bright sunlight does help you get a good exposure with a fast shutter speed.



A backlit subject often stands out against the background with great detail around the edges, although it can be challenging to preserve detail in the shaded parts of the subject.



Partial lighting can be a challenge, but can also create a dramatic spotlight effect that accentuates your subject.

On cloudy days, the light is softer, which is good for egrets or other light-colored birds that may be almost too bright in direct sun.

Of course, the ideal lighting also depends on what you are trying to do. The time around sunrise and sunset is known as the golden hour or magic hour because the light is soft and red. Even though there may not be as much light, the light that is available can make for some unique and beautiful shots.

If you're facing the "wrong" direction, you can often get interesting shots like silhouettes or backlit images where the light from behind gives a glow to the feathers around the edge of the bird.

Planning for the right light is the best way to get practice at traditional bird portraits, but it can be just as fun to improvise and experiment in unplanned situations. It is also worth remembering that birds themselves may be acting differently at different times of day or in different weather, so holding out for perfect lighting can give an incomplete picture of their behavior.

Pro photographers might spend days waiting for the right conditions to get a "perfect" shot. Most enthusiasts don't have that luxury (or commitment). However, waiting five minutes for a cloud to pass or taking ten minutes to walk to a different vantage point can be transformative. It is often just a matter of remembering to take a moment to look for a better way to capture what is in front of you.

Backgrounds

When it comes to backgrounds for bird photos, less is usually more. There are exceptions to every rule, but a relatively plain background that provides strong contrast with the bird that's the subject of the photo is almost always a good thing.

Getting the right backgrounds isn't always easy, and in some situations it probably isn't possible at all. Still, once you appreciate a good background, you may find yourself scouting out the right background as much as the right bird when you take pictures.

Sky and water usually make good backgrounds. They both tend to be plain and usually provide good contrast with the bird you are photographing. Blue skies are generally more pleasing and easier to work with than clouds. Clouds can reflect too much light, making it difficult to get a good exposure, and white or gray is generally less pleasant than blue.

Water can be a wonderful background. The turquoise Caribbean sea is a favorite, but water comes in many colors and most of them work well behind a bird. Water can also create interesting patterns and reflections that add to a photo without being distracting.



Blue skies make a fantastic background that highlights the subject. Cloudy skies are also plain, but typically less pleasing and can make it difficult to get a proper exposure.



An ideal background provides plenty of contrast with the subject, but it can also contain other elements that contribute to the overall composition.



The right placement of a high-contrast background element can make a big difference in how clear the subject is.

There are plenty of other plain backgrounds to be found if you go looking for them: sand, stone or even a plain wall. Depending on your camera gear and settings, many backgrounds become pleasantly blurry, especially if there is some distance between the subject and the background. A tangle of vegetation that is distracting in focus can become the perfect backdrop when blurred beyond recognition.

Of course, the best backgrounds usually aren't completely plain, they just don't overwhelm the subject. Objects, shapes and textures can all add to a photo. They can also tell a story, and habitat can play an important role in bird photos.

One thing you probably don't want in the background of your photos is trash. Few things ruin an otherwise lovely bird photo more completely than a discarded can or plastic bag. In addition to learning to seek out good backgrounds, you will probably develop an instinct for avoiding trash, especially after you discover a few otherwise lovely photos are ruined by some litter you didn't notice at the time.

One way to learn about backgrounds is to take a look at some of your favorite bird photos and analyze the backgrounds. Do they make the photo better or keep it from being great? Also, when you go out to take some photos, pause to consider the background as you take each shot. Is it clear from distractions? Could it be improved by moving over a few feet or squatting down to get a different angle?



It can be easy to overlook trash when you are focused on capturing the moment. Sadly, it can be all too obvious after the fact, like the drink bottle behind the neck of this heron.

In Flight

Photographing birds in flight is one of the great challenges of bird photography. Your subject is not only in motion, it is free to move in any direction in a three-dimensional space. It could be tempting to give up on in flight shots altogether, if it weren't for the fact that flight is a defining feature of all the birds that live around us. In flight bird photos are a challenge, but they're also a must.

In general, you will want to use a fast shutter speed to freeze motion, and you'll need to learn to track the movement of birds as they fly. A good way to start is to shoot birds passing overhead, like Magnificent Frigatebirds. Often, these birds are gliding around at a leisurely pace, making it a relatively easy shot.

For this kind of photo, you'll choose a subject and track it as it flies around. In general, the closer the better, but for birds in flight, the closer they are the faster they seem to move, so for in flight photos the sweet spot may be in the middle distance. (Just as someone running ten feet in front of you passes in an instant, but seen from a mile away would move very slowly across your field of vision.) Blue sky in the background is better than clouds, and you will also want to avoid having the sun directly behind the bird you are photographing.

Takeoffs and landings are very dynamic moments that can be great to capture. They also have their own advantages. When photographing a takeoff, you may not know when the bird will choose to fly, but you know where it is.



A soaring frigatebird makes a good subject when learning how to track birds in the air.



Takeoff is a dynamic moment to capture, and timing is everything. By observing birds, you may learn to identify signs that they are about to take flight.



A bird slowing down to make a landing makes an excellent photo opportunity. Both wings and legs are in motion, and the viewer anticipates the landing.



With wings outstretched, you may have to make a choice between showing the entire bird or highlighting details.

Birds typically slow down when landing, giving you a little bit more time to get a great photo and making it easier to freeze the motion. Their wings and legs are typically both in motion at this moment, adding excitement to the image.

In both cases, learning to predict the future is a key skill. What does a bird do right before it takes off? Many birds will bend their legs to spring up from the ground or leap away from a perch. If you can learn to spot this, you get an extra split-second warning that your moment is arriving. If you're tracking a bird through your viewfinder, you can look for a bird dropping its legs in preparation for a landing the way that a plane lowers its landing gear.

For practice, spend some time watching birds to see how they take off, fly around and land, and then find a spot where you can photograph some birds in flight.

Observation and anticipation can be particularly helpful when photographing birds in flight. Look for birds taking advantage of a prevailing wind or circling to feed in a specific spot and you can put yourself in position to get the shot. Once you're there, patience and the willingness to take a seemingly infinite number of shots are the traits you'll depend on to get a real keeper.

One with the Flock

Photographing groups of birds seems easy. What could be better than having a whole bunch of birds, right? Consider, however, trying to take a group photo with many people: arranging and rearranging to get everyone in the shot, endless photos until no one is blinking, saying “One more!” as everyone groans. Photographing groups of birds is like that, but with even less cooperation from the subjects.

Basically, every decision you would make when shooting one bird is compounded when photographing multiple birds. Instead of composing a photo around one bird, you are doing so for several, or many. Instead of waiting for one face to turn the right direction, you’re waiting for three, or five. It sounds impossible, and sometimes it seems impossible, but a few simple concepts can help get you on the right track.

Start by finding a composition that works. For small groups of two to five birds, look for scenes where the birds fill out the space in an interesting way. They could be arranged on a diagonal line or form a triangle or zig zag. This is more likely to feel dynamic and lead a viewer through the image.

Several birds in a straight line can seem flat and boring. In a situation like that, it can be better to focus on a single bird, or move so you can get a more interesting composition.



Smaller groups of birds are easier to photograph.



Large groups of birds can be very difficult to photograph. It may be hard to have a clear focal point, the composition can be cluttered, and individual birds can be cut by the edge of the frame.



It's almost always useful to have one bird as a focal point. It helps you get a better shot and gives the viewer a clear subject to gravitate towards.



If you can't keep everything in focus in a group composition, it is almost always better to keep the foreground in focus, so try to place your subject there.

If you have a large flock of birds, try capturing it while zooming in to different intervals. You may find that a photo of part of a flock is more interesting than the whole flock. You may also want to look for small breaks in the flock, so you can photograph part of the flock without having partial birds all around the edge of your photo, which can be distracting.

What about “one with the flock?” It means don't take a photo of a flock of birds—take a photo of one bird with a flock around it. More than any other tip, this will help make your flock photos dynamic instead of formless. No matter how many birds you see, you still have to focus on something, so pick one bird and build the photo around it. It's the bird that will literally be in focus, and you can wait until it looks at the camera or does something interesting.

For practice, try to get yourself to a spot where you can practice taking photos of one with the flock. If you can't, take some time to review your favorite bird group photos and consider why you like them.

Sometimes you just can't get the shot you want. It's true of any situation, but especially true when trying to capture a group shot. You could use the situation to practice your technique or try to find a better shot by focusing on a single bird within the group. Sometimes the most rewarding course of action is to take a break from photographing to simply enjoy watching the birds.



Visual Storytelling

The Second Subject

When is a background not a background? When it is the second subject of the photo.

We've looked at backgrounds from an aesthetic sense: what looks nice and showcases the bird. Now we consider backgrounds as a second subject in a photo. Usually this subject is the bird's habitat. Of course, by definition photos taken of wild birds will have their habitat in the background, but it isn't necessarily featured as a second subject.

There's a fine line between a background and a second subject, and the distinction is, well, subjective. Still, there are some distinct ways to showcase a habitat. Details can show specifics of a habitat. A background of plain sky or water doesn't tell the viewer much about the scene. The pneumatophores (aerial roots) of a mangrove tree immediately convey much more information about the habitat and ecosystem featured in the photo.

When composing a photo to convey both a bird and its habitat, it can be useful to zoom out and capture more of the scene. In addition to capturing more details of the habitat, it provides a visual cue indicating the importance of the setting. On a practical level, if a bird is too far away for a traditional portrait, showcasing the habitat can be a great way of creating a compelling image.



Distinctive vegetation, like these mangrove pneumatophores, can be used to place a bird in the context of the habitat it depends on.



A shorebird surrounded by sargassum suggests the story of an ecological phenomenon and its impact on local wildlife.



Other animals can also be included to capture the ecological context, like a cow with a Cattle Egret.



A bird can also be the second subject in a photo that is primarily about something else, like a landscape.

Using habitat as a second subject can be tricky. In addition to capturing the bird, one must capture the setting in a way that conveys specific information. On top of that, ideally the whole image comes together into something that is engaging and pleasing. There are many questions. How much detail to include? Where does the bird fit into the scene? Does the scene accurately reflect the typical habitat for this bird? Often, for each question there are multiple possible answers.

It's also worth mentioning that sometimes the roles are reversed. Having a bird in your photo doesn't always mean that the bird is the subject. Birds can be a great detail that improves a photo of pond, beach or other scene. A beautiful natural scene without animals can feel empty, like a photo of a building or street with no people. Habitat can be a wonderful second subject for bird photos, and birds can be a wonderful addition to other photos.

For practice, consider habitat as a second subject when taking your bird photos. Zoom out a bit and experiment with composing scenes with birds in them rather than birds against backgrounds.

If your camera is not well-suited to taking bird portraits, you might want to focus on capturing birds within their broader environment.

Capturing Behavior

How does bird photography remain fascinating and challenging year after year? A deeper understanding of birds compels us to capture not just the birds, but also their many unique behaviors.

Observing bird behavior is fascinating. Some behaviors, like hunting and feeding chicks, are immediately recognizable to us, and reinforce the fact that we are both animals and share many of the same activities in life. Other behaviors, like certain mating rituals, may seem strange and exotic to us. Capturing behavior in photographs allows us to share these moments, both commonplace and extraordinary.

Of course, anything a bird does is part of its behavior. Even resting can be evocative, as when a sandpiper tucks its beak into the feathers on its back for a midday snooze. More active behavior is the primary focus of this article, however. Capturing bird behavior is more dependent on skills like patience, careful observation and knowledge of birds than apertures and shutter speeds. The photographic principles covered in past articles don't change when capturing behavior.

Everyday behaviors of most birds include feeding, preening (straightening and cleaning feathers), and communicating with song. Because birds are so diverse, these activities manifest themselves in a variety of ways.

The Great Egret will stalk shallow water looking for fish to spear with its bill, while the Gray Kingbird sallies forth from



Photos that capture behavior well may be different than a typical portrait. In this case, the Bananaquit's face isn't visible.



Although large parts of the animal kingdom forgo it entirely, most birds put a great deal of effort into parenting and these are fantastic behaviors to capture.



Displays related to breeding and defense, like this attempt to draw attention away from a nest, are often striking.



Preening is often a quiet, intimate moment to capture. It can also be a chance to view parts of a bird that may be hidden when a bird is resting.

high perches to catch flying insects. Some ducks dabble and some ducks dive. You can become familiar with the daily behaviors of the birds around you through observation, and put yourself in the right place at the right time to capture these activities.

Seasonal behaviors are often linked to reproduction, although some resident birds reproduce throughout the year. Courtship, nesting and the rearing of chicks are all fascinating behaviors. Killdeer couples often do a scrape ceremony when selecting a nesting site prior to mating. Sugar birds often make nests in visible locations, making it easier to document the process. Female hummingbirds feed their chicks frequently, a fantastic photo subject if you know the location of a nest. Knowledge of the life cycle of local birds, like their nesting season and the type of habitat or specific locations where birds nest and raise their young, is key to being able to document many of these behaviors.

There are also unusual behaviors that are worth capturing as well: a Gray Kingbird with a broken beak foraging on the ground instead of in the air or a young Brown Booby with a fish stuck in its throat after trying to swallow it tail-first. These behaviors may not even stand out as unusual without knowledge of what normal behavior for these species looks like.

For practice, spend some time trying to first observe, and then photograph, the daily behaviors of birds around you, like feeding and preening. Try to capture the essence of the activities you are observing.

The Human Element

Bringing a human element into wildlife photography can often make your work more accessible and interesting. When we see a person interacting with a bird, for example, it is easier as a viewer to put ourselves in the picture mentally. Capturing birds in urban or otherwise human-modified environments can also add a compelling angle to your work. For example, salt ponds can be both a powerful historical symbol, as well as a key habitat for many birds.

Conservation photography—photography aimed at achieving conservation outcomes—often takes a journalistic approach to visual storytelling. Although photos have been used in this way for decades, the concept of conservation photography as a practice has largely developed over the last ten years or so and has become increasingly popular.

Photos highlighting environmental destruction tend to be less visually appealing, but often they contain striking contrasts that make them powerful images. By focusing on an idea or story and creating a composition that expresses it, traditional techniques can be used to maximize the impact of non-traditional wildlife images. Done well, these images often elicit a strong response and have the potential to illustrate a conservation issue on many levels: aesthetically, emotionally, and intellectually.

For more information about conservation photography, visit the International League of Conservation Photographers online at <http://www.ilcp.com>.



An oil-soaked Killdeer highlights the danger of improper waste management, even when it is taking place on a small scale.



Effective conservation photography might highlight the contrast between man and nature.



The Art of Composition

Composition Tools

Composition is essentially how you arrange the elements in your photo. Every photo is composed: the camera is pointed in one direction or another. How you choose to compose depends entirely on what you are trying to accomplish. The first step is to be conscious that you are composing a photo.

Unlike painters, most bird photographers don't get to make up their compositions from scratch. That doesn't mean a bird photographer doesn't have the tools to build a composition. Even assuming that you can't move the bird or change its physical surroundings, you can usually make a wide variety of compositions from the same scene.

For starters, you can move yourself. Does a bad background get better if you move a few feet to one side or drop down on your knee? Deciding where you should be in relation to the bird, the background and the sun is probably your first consideration when composing a photo. There's a train of thought that starts with "Can I take a photo of that bird from here?" Try to stay on that train until "Where is the best place to be to get this shot?" and "What other angle might be even better?"

Your camera is also a compositional tool. Your choice of lens or how close you zoom in on your bird are compositional choices. As you look through the viewfinder and frame your image, you are deciding what is in the photo and what isn't. You may be making other choices as well, like choosing an aperture that will bring focus to your subject while leaving the background blurry. You can



Some compositions work well because the photographer has found an angle that removes almost everything else from the frame, like still water on an overcast day taken from just the right angle.



Depth of field can be used to simplify compositions. Both the vegetation in the foreground and the water in the background are completely out of focus, drawing attention to the heron's face, which is sharp.



An open mouth and head tilted upward animate what would otherwise be a very static shot of a Common Gallinule on its nest. When photographing a still subject it can pay to wait for a moment of activity.



A Red-billed Tropicbird using its wings and tail to slow itself down for a landing makes for an unusual composition. The blurry wings highlight the motion of the moment and also funnel attention down to the tail and feet.

also adjust your compositions after the fact by cropping your photos, although this usually works best when you are taking photos with a future crop in mind.

For bird photography, time can be one of the most important compositional tools you have in the field. You may wait until a perched bird faces in the direction you want, or when a moving bird gets in the right spot in relation to its surroundings. You may wait until the sun comes out from behind a cloud or the wind blows a swaying branch into position in the background.

For practice, when you see a bird, photograph it from different angles and see how the scene changes from different perspectives. Experiment with how close you zoom in and where you place the bird in the frame. If you pass a bird and don't have your camera, you can even do the same exercise in your mind. Get a feel for how much control you do have in your compositions and what is pleasing to you.

Experimenting with composition is a great way to keep bird photography fresh. As a beginner, it is often hard enough to just get a clear photo at all. Experimenting with composition can help you find new ways to engage with even the most common birds around you.

Composition Rules

For something so subjective, it is a shame that thinking about composition in photography is often distilled into so-called rules, but the ideas behind the rules can be very helpful.

Composition influences how a viewer interacts with a photo. It draws attention to the subject of the photo, leads the viewer's eye around the photo and gives the photo a sense of motion and excitement. When photographing birds, you're composing from a scene as it exists in nature, so you won't use every compositional concept in each photo, but some will always be in play.

There are many ways to draw attention to the subject of your photo. Shoot from an angle that doesn't leave distracting elements in the photo. Look for contrasting backgrounds to make your subject stand out. Use depth of field to make the background or foreground blurry while your subject is in focus. Use visible or implicit lines in the photo to lead the viewer to your subject.

Drawing the viewer's attention to the subject of your photo seems like an obvious goal, and it is. Developing your compositional skills will help you do it better, using a wider variety of the tools available to you. It will help you spot good opportunities in the field and turn them into great photos.

Composition is also used to lead the viewer through the image and give the image a sense of motion and excitement.



A strong vertical line divides the frame, and the curled part of the banana flower creates a line leading to where the Bananaquit is perched. The Bananaquit gazes out over the empty space.



Crossed lines frame the Gray Kingbird, which faces the point where the lines meet. A clear, blue sky provides a plain backdrop for a very simple composition.



Four Black-necked Stilts form a “V” shape that draws attention down to the bird in front and its raised foot, which is highlighted by the sun, while the rest of the leg is in the shade.



Cacti divide this composition vertically. The calling Lesser Antillean Bullfinch points towards the second cactus fruit, which echoes and balances the fruit with the bird on it.

Engaging compositions usually avoid placing the subject in the center of the photo. Centering the subject feels flat and it seems harder to move around the photo after landing in the center. Avoiding the center is the goal of the rule of thirds: mentally dividing your image in to a 3x3 grid and placing your subject along one of those imaginary lines.

The actual lines in your image can be very important. Lines that lead to a focal point are referred to as leading lines. Diagonal lines can give a sense of movement, while horizontal or vertical lines tend to lend a feeling of stillness and stability.

Some of the most important lines in your photos may be invisible. The direction a bird is looking creates an implied line, just as it does in a human portrait. Try leaving space in your composition for the viewer to look in the direction the bird is looking. The same is true of a bird walking or flying: the direction the bird is traveling creates a line that the viewer is likely to follow. These invisible lines are particularly powerful in bird photography because the bird’s bill often acts like an arrow pointing the viewer in a particular direction.

There are countless books and articles about composition in photography and plenty of other tips and ideas worth understanding. Try taking a look at some of your favorite bird photos and consider how the composition of these photos makes them more interesting to you.



In the Digital Darkroom

Select and Organize

What do you do with your bird photos once you've taken them? If you're getting into the hobby, probably they're on your computer. Perhaps you'll share them online, create a slideshow to use as a screen saver or even print some of them. Whatever your plan, the first steps are usually to select and organize your photos.

Selecting photos can be a big challenge. It can often mean sorting through many very similar photos to find the very best one. Professional software programs like Adobe Lightroom are designed to help selecting and organizing photos, making it easier to pick the best photo out of a group of similar shots and to sort and label photos so you can find them quickly.

You don't need fancy software to select and organize your photos, but however you do it, it is good to have a system. If you have multiple shots of a bird from different angles, you might discard the weaker compositions first and then zoom in on the remaining shots to see which one had the best focus and details. Developing an efficient workflow makes a big difference, especially if you sometimes shoot several hundred photos in a day.

Should you delete photos? It is a personal choice, but when you take a lot of bird photos, you're bound to have many that simply aren't very good and deleting photos can help you focus on the ones that are good. If you don't want to delete, tagging or rating photos in your photo management software can be used to hide your bad photos.



Keep an eye out for the unexpected. This Laughing Gull seems torn between two impulses, looking back over its shoulder while preparing to take flight.



You might want to save several photos from a series. Depending on the purpose, one might want a sandpiper accenting an image of mangrove wetlands or mangroves providing a backdrop for an image of a sandpiper.



It might take dozens of photos to get an image where all the elements come together—focus, lighting, the bird facing the right direction and foot raised—you may not need to save the ones that didn't work.



On the computer, you have time to see the details you might not have noticed in the field, like the droplets of water flying as a sandpiper scratches its face.

Organizing and labeling photos can be a bit of a drag, but it is tremendously useful in the long run. That can mean adding the location, the type of bird and other information to help you find the photo later. Photo management software is designed for this, as well as other ways to rate and tag your photos.

Organization is crucial if you plan on using your bird photos, for example in books and presentations. In fact, good organization is often overlooked for all kinds of photos. Being able to instantly find all your best photos from your last vacation or all your favorite bird photos makes it so much easier to enjoy your photos, on your own or with friends. There are way too many wonderful photos and memories hidden away in the jumbled digital shoeboxes of our hard drives.

Of course, always make sure you are backing up your photos! Your photo backup can be part of your regular computer backups, and is hopefully something you don't need to think about too much. Using a website like flickr to share your best photos can also be a good way of having an additional backup online.

Post-production

Formerly done in the darkroom, post-production now happens mostly on computers. It's a chance to add the polish that will make your best photos shine, and it really isn't cheating.

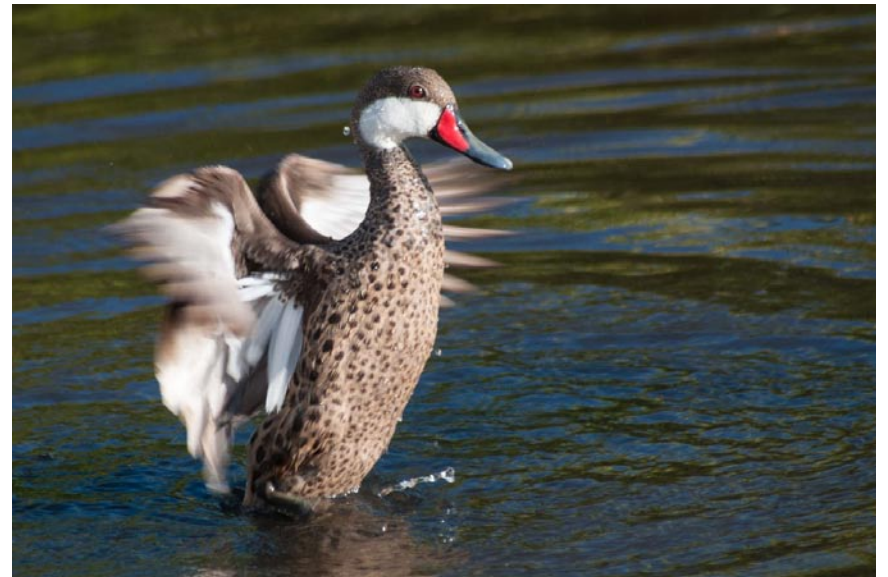
How you do your bird photography post-production may depend on what you do with your photos. Do you post them on Facebook, use them for your desktop screen saver or make prints? Today, the post-production process can even take place entirely on a phone. Regardless of how much time and energy you invest in your post-production, you'll probably do a few common things to get the most out of your photos.

As much as one wants to get a photo right "in the camera," there's nothing wrong with making adjustments on the computer. In the field, it can be a big challenge to get everything technically perfect while still focusing on moving birds and quickly changing scenes. Photo software is just a tool. One wouldn't avoid making adjustments to camera settings before taking a photo and there's no reason to avoid adjusting the photo after.

Some common adjustments are often made to simply make the photo closer to what you photographed. The human eye and brain are much better than any camera at processing light. A photo may be too dark, too bright, or have spots of both. The color balance may be off. Depending on the software you are using, there are many ways to adjust brightness, contrast and white balance to compensate for



Cropping during post-production is a chance to fine-tune the composition. The original composition is similar, but the in-camera placement was limited by the location of the camera's focus points.



Our eyes are much better at processing a large disparity between light and dark than a camera. Post-production can help restore details in light or dark areas that are difficult to represent simultaneously.



Your overall image may be too light or dark, especially if you are taking photos in a high-contrast environment or when the intensity of light is changing, for example, at sunset or when clouds are passing.



In images with large areas of clear sky, dust on your camera sensor can be seen as distracting spots. These are usually easy to remove in software.

the limitations of your camera sensor, or shots where your settings weren't quite right.

For bird photos, cropping is a pretty common edit to make. It isn't always possible to get close enough to a bird to get the perfect composition. This can also be a time to refine your composition. In the field you manage many elements to try to capture a moment. Although you can't rearrange the elements after the fact (at least, not without some fancy Photoshopping), you can change the photo quite a bit by cropping. For example, moving your subject closer to or further from the center of the photo or cropping out a distracting element.

Post-production possibilities are infinite and they range from minor technical adjustments to artistic experiments that really go beyond photography. Luckily, there are loads of resources online, and it can also be fun to just experiment.

The best way to develop your technique and learn what you like is to practice. Over time, you can also look back at your previous post-production work. You'll probably find that, just like your photography itself, your post-production gets better with experience. Plus, unlike your photography, you can actually go back and redo your old post-production to reflect your improved skills!



Time to Share

Getting out into nature is a reward in and of itself. The sense of purpose and satisfaction from developing a craft like bird photography only adds to that enjoyment.

But you'll have photos as well, and you can choose what to do with them. You can share them on Facebook or print them and give them as gifts. You might also consider sharing them in ways that benefit science or conservation.

You might record your bird observations and upload photos to a website like ebird.org. Thousands of people have contributed nearly 10 million sightings, which are used by scientists to learn about birds, their populations and their movements.

You might want to donate images to organizations doing research, education or conservation. A relatively easy way to make your images available is to upload them to a site like flickr.com, which allows you to specify Creative Commons licenses for your images. You can specify a license that allows, for example, non-commercial use.

Of course, working directly with a local non-profit could be the most rewarding way to use your photos and photographic skills while learning and having a positive impact on your local environment.

Much of the book is adapted from articles published in the Weekender section of *The Daily Herald*, edited by Lisa Burnett. For more free resources created by Les Fruits de Mer, visit them on the web at lesfruitsdemer.com.

